# Whammy:

By AM2 Harold Hughart

## Poor Judgment and Illegal Shortcuts Equal Disaster


Photographs by Mattew J. Thomas

Our squadron was on detachment in Fallon, Nev., and the tempo had become routine. We had done lots of jobs on our Hornets, and new technicians had done much of that work. I began my shift as the supervisor and was lucky to have that title at shift change.

We had a 400-hour aircraft inspection on the schedule. That task required us to remove the trailing-edge flap shrouds. With the flaps in the up position, we would need electrical and hydraulic power to run them down. This presented two problems: The AMEs had to finish working inside the 64L access panel, and this task required four qualified airframers.

Closing door 64L was critical. That simple step would allow the flaps to travel freely through their full range of motion. Left unsecured, however, sufficient clearance would exist only when the flaps are full up or full down. Any attempt to move the flaps between those two extremes would cause a collision with panel 64L. My shop had other work, which left only three airframers available. I chose to do the job anyway.

When the AMEs were finished, two unqualified airframers—an AM3 and an AMAA—joined me. I did my CDI walk-around and found the AMEs had not closed door 64L. I didn't have the fasteners to close it, so I told my AMAA to push down on the panel, until the trailing edge flaps were in the full-down position. I then told my AM3 to man the cockpit and to run down the flaps when signaled.

Though unqualified for the task, the AM3 seemed ready to prove his worth, so I gave him a brief lesson and proceeded with the job. My errors were piling up, and it didn't take long

before this last mistake turned into disaster. Had I used ORM, it would have stopped me a long time ago, but I didn't have the foresight to use it.

With hydraulic power already on the aircraft, I applied electrical power and signaled the AM3 to lower the flaps. The flaps came to the full-down position, and I gave a "thumbs up" to verify this. Meanwhile, with the flaps now down and clear, the AMAA let go of door 64L. The AM3 in the cockpit misinterpreted my "thumbs up" signal and secured electrical power without my consent.

With hydraulic power still on and no electricity, the flight controls reverted to the back-up mechanical mode and attempted to drive up the flaps. As they did so, the left flap crunched panel 64L. I heard the AMAA scream on the left-hand side of the aircraft, I immediately ran to the hydraulic test stand and shut off the unit. Not knowing what had happened, I thought he was injured. I was thankful when I got to the other side and saw he was just a bit dazed and confused. The flap, however, was not so lucky. We damaged it and would have to replace it, but supply didn't have one.

I screwed up...big time! I should have told maintenance that I had to wait on my qualified cockpit operator to finish another task. I should have taken the time to get the fasteners for the panel and should have secured it. I shouldn't have thrust well-intentioned but untrained maintainers into a rushed job. I sure as heck didn't set the right example for these youngsters to follow.

I'm thankful no one was injured, and I luckily kept my job. As a result of this unfortunate mishap, I have become a much better supervisor. I now take time to instruct everyone thoroughly on each task and make them review every precaution. Ground-crew coordination training and operational risk management are tools that can prevent this type of mishap. I work diligently to include their steps in every job we do. One of those steps is to be assertive, and I now am not afraid to consult with the maintenance-control chief on priorities and manpower issues.

Petty Officer Hughart wrote this story while assigned to VFA-83. He now is assigned to AIMD Norfolk.

*This story reminds me of a CO's response I read after his maintainers illegally had rigged an ejection seat. The seat somehow interfered with the control stick, and we lost a Hornet. The CO said, "These maintainers did not have malice in their hearts." I'm sure that's true, but anytime a maintainer takes a shortcut, an aircraft and aircrew run the risk of not coming home. Doing it by the book is the only sure way to avoid maintenance error.—Ed.*

## Mech Info



Do yourself a favor; read the story on sun exposure in the January 2003 issue of *Approach*. In the next issue of *Mech*, read about the NavAir response center and how it can help you.